

# Pitt's next basketball coach should be Brandin Knight, ex-Panthers contend

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Travon Woodall called it a no-brainer. In fact, a large group Pitt's former players think Pitt athletic director Scott Barnes shouldn't have to look very far for the Panthers' new basketball coach.

To them, Brandin Knight is the perfect fit, and he's already there.

Knight, who former coach Jamie Dixon reportedly endorsed before he left for TCU, has spent nearly his entire career around the Pitt program since he played there from 1999-03. He joined Dixon's staff in 2006 as a program assistant/video coordinator and then moved up to director of basketball operations in 2007. He became an assistant coach in 2008 and has been on the staff since.

Former players, both those who played under him and with him, have taken to Twitter to advocate for Knight to move up again, this time to head coach. Woodall, who played for Pitt from 2008-12, has been among the most outspoken and on Wednesday he said hiring Knight "just makes the most sense."

"A lot of these colleges are going for younger coaches because one, these coaches relate to players," he said. "I think the game has changed to the point where these kids understand younger coaches now, and they want to play for these guys."

"A guy like Brandin, even when I was in school, we all looked to him for direction. For one, because he's a former player and he definitely has a feel for what the game is now. The game has evolved so much."

Woodall and others understand the allure of a coach like Sean Miller, who on Tuesday released a statement that he wasn't interested in leaving Arizona for his alma mater. But Woodall said since it's not going to be Miller, then "Brandin is the guy."

Woodall described Knight as a gym rat, someone who sleeps for four or five hours a night and spends the rest of his time working. He believes Knight can build from what Ben Howland and Dixon created to take the program to another level.

"What's considered a big-name hire?" Woodall said. "A guy that won a game in the (NCAA) Tournament at a smaller school? Is that a big-name guy? ... We're talking about big names who are coaching in the smaller conferences. To me, what makes them so big name?"

"Brandin's jersey is hanging in the rafters. ... He's the one who led us to a Big East championship. He's the one who brought Pitt back as a player and made us relevant again and then again as a coach, kept that going. To me, that's the big-name guy."

To Gilbert Brown, who was at Pitt from 2006-11, Knight isn't just the "right fit", he's the "only fit." Since Pitt isn't a storied program like Duke or Arizona, the next coach has to be someone players gravitate toward. Knight, Brown said via text messages, is that kind of person.

"He's more than qualified to be a head coach and knows what it takes to run a program of that magnitude," Brown said. "He has been the heart and soul of that program ever since he laced up his sneakers to play there, and it carried over when he got involved as a coach."

"I would want to play for him," said Jaron Brown, who played with Knight at Pitt. "He's energetic. He's going to fight for his players and going to make you a better player and a better person."

Barnes said in his press conference on Tuesday that the next Pitt coach has to be someone who is going to "absolutely recruit his tail off." Woodall feels that's a perfect description of Knight, who is one of the main reasons Woodall committed at the end of his sophomore year of high school and never wavered. Knight earned his trust and confidence.

"Coach Dixon is one of the great coaches that I've ever played for," Woodall said, "but Brandin goes out everywhere. Everyone knows him because he was a player as well as a coach. A lot of these AAU

coaches, a lot of these high school coaches, they remember him playing or they were playing around the same time.

“He has these connections where he can find a kid in the deepest part of Mississippi, he can find a kid in the deepest part of New York. Wherever. He has so many connections. And after the parents and the players meet coach Knight, he might have to cut players off. ... Everyone wants to come play for him.”

“If you ask the majority of players that played under him and with him, they would tell you he’s built for this job,” Gilbert Brown said. “His heart and passion for the game is the University of Pittsburgh basketball program.”

The biggest complaints surrounding the program in recent years have been that fans want better players, or different players, and they want to see a new style of play. Since Knight was a part of the staff, some believe he’s not the right choice to elevate the program or give it a fresh start.

Many of the players disagree.

Knight was an assistant, Woodall said, so the program wasn’t entirely under his control. Parents send their children to play for head coaches, not for assistants. And Woodall hasn’t met the parents of anyone who came through the Pitt program who didn’t want their child to play for Knight.

“Parents can be very impressed with the with the assistant coaches,” Woodall said. “Very impressed. But at the end of the day, they’re sending kids away to the head coach. If they’re not that impressed with the head coach, ultimately, I guess, it falls back on the assistants, that the assistants couldn’t get them? At the end of the day, parents have to be confident enough in the head coach.”

“As the head coach, you have a lot more say-so,” Jaron Brown said. “(As an assistant), he didn’t have as much freedom to recruit who he wanted to recruit. As a head coach, you can recruit who you like.”

As for changing how the team plays, Knight, said Woodall, “coached under Dixon. He can’t coach over Dixon.” Dixon had his playing style, and Knight perfected that because it was job. Woodall, though, is sure Knight’s style would be different.

“He loves the game,” Woodall said. “He loves to strategize. He has so many plays he has drawn up.”

“When (fans) say they need a big name hire, they don’t understand how important it is to have someone who has been there since day one,” Jaron said. “He has a different style he wants to play. ... I know some people want (Pitt) to play differently. Brandin is good at adjustments and he’s the right fit because of that.”

When Jaron was playing, Knight, then the Panthers’ point guard, would often override Howland’s play calls. He sees things, Jaron said, that other people don’t.

“Brandin is a very smart coach, as he was a player,” Gilbert Brown said. “The same way he was a point guard and read the game on the floor, he would do as an assistant coach on the sidelines to help us understand our roles offensively and defensively.”

“He knows firsthand playing in this type of environment, knowing what he sees, his calm demeanor and his poise,” Woodall said. “You would think at some points that he was literally on the court with us because the plays that he called worked so perfectly.”

Woodall said Knight was a big reason why, after the run to the Elite Eight in 2009, the team didn’t fall as far as people expected during the next two seasons. A year after losing Levance Fields, Sam Young and DeJuan Blair, the Panthers earned a No. 3 seed in the NCAA Tournament. A season later, they were back on the top line.

Knight wouldn’t accept a drop off. He kept pushing, and made sure Pitt was one of the top defensive teams in the Big East the next two seasons because he knew it needed to be. The role he played might have gone unnoticed, Woodall said, but it was vital.

“He wants to see Pittsburgh achieve,” Woodall said. “He’s one of those guys (who will) make it happen. By any means, he’ll make it happen. If he has to stay up 24 hours and call every parent across the country, he will make it happen. Coach Howland felt comfortable enough to put the ball in hands as a freshman. Coach Dixon felt comfortable enough to move him up every year on his coaching staff because he knew he was somebody who could help this program.

“So, I feel like our AD should be comfortable enough to know that he’s been successful at everything he does and every facet of his life and every stage of his career. This is going to be another achievement, and I know the AD won’t regret it and the program won’t regret it.”